

**SOCIAL RULE: A  
STUDY OF THE WILL  
TO POWER**

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Social Rule: A Study of the Will to Power by Elsie Clews Parsons

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***By Elsie Clews Parsons***

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**The Family**

**Religious Chastity**

**The Old-Fashioned Woman**

**Fear and Conventionality**

**Social Freedom**

**Social Rule**

# Social Rule

A Study of the Will to Power

By

Elsie Clews Parsons



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# Social Rule

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## THE SATISFACTION FROM THE SOCIAL CATEGORIES

**I**N any study of the relations between personality and social classification the queries arise why the social categories are alike so compulsive to the conservative-minded and so precious, why they are given such unflinching loyalty, why such unquestioning devotion? To offset the miseries they allow of or further, the tragedies they prepare, what satisfaction do they offer? Do they serve only as measures against change, as safeguards to habit,—this is the answer I once suggested,<sup>1</sup>—raising barriers between those most apt to upset one another's ways, the inevitably unlike, the unlike in sex, in age, in economic or cultural class?

<sup>1</sup> Parsons, Elsie Clews, *Social Freedom*, p. 104, New York, 1915.



The social categories are no doubt a safeguard against the innovations personality untrammelled would be up to, and this protection is by no means a trifling social function; but the categories, it now seems to me, perform a positive as well as a negative service, they are an unparalleled means of gratifying the will to power<sup>1</sup> as it expresses itself in social relations. The classified individual may be held in subjection in ways the unclassified escapes. "Being women, eat crumbs!" a Chukchee may exclaim. A woman who dares talk back hears, "Since you are a woman, be silent!"<sup>2</sup> Besides, a would-be woman rebel is kept in her place the more easily if her rebellion mean "unsexing" herself, for both sexes will be arrayed against her.<sup>3</sup> Similarly a refractory junior will

<sup>1</sup> Since I shall make considerable use of this phrase, I would suggest that, like any other popular catch-word, it is harmless as long as it is recognised as a mere verbal convenience; but that it is a constraint upon thought when sociological authority is imputed to it. I therefore beg the reader to take it always in this discussion as a descriptive and not as an explanatory term. It is descriptive of that "general inclination of all mankind" which Hobbes calls "a perpetual desire of power after power that ceaseth only in death."

<sup>2</sup> Bogoras, W., *Mem. Amer. Mus. Nat. Hist.*, VII., Pt. II., 547, 548. Leiden and New York, 1907.

<sup>3</sup> Margaret Fuller once described very neatly the sometime value of sex classification to Anglo-Saxon husbands. "It has

not only be told that as a junior he should be seen and not heard, but, in recognition of the principle of seniority, he will find all his elders standing together against him. The poor man, the wage-earner, the slave, the illiterate, the commoner will have against him in any conflict with one of superior station all of the "upper" classes. The lawless, once pronounced a criminal, will have against him all the law-abiding.<sup>2</sup> Once the abnormal is labelled he is at the mercy of the normal. The more fixed the traits and functions of a ghost or god, the more assured and classified his supernaturalism, the more thoroughly is he in hand,

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been inculcated on women, for centuries, that men have not only stronger passions than they, but of a sort that it would be shameful for them to share or even understand; that, therefore, they must 'confide in their husbands,' that is, submit implicitly to their will. . . . Accordingly, a great part of women look upon men as a kind of wild beasts, but 'suppose they are all alike.'" (*Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, pp. 150-1. Boston, Cleveland, New York, 1855.)

<sup>2</sup> The anti-national, I might add, or even the critic of national traits or trends will have against him all the patriotic. In this study I have not included an analysis of nationalism, but it deserves consideration in its aspect as a means of social rule. "I could not have controlled that convention," the president of a nationalist association said to me the other day, "had I not appealed from time to time to the national feeling. 'You say this' or 'you act thus,' I would exclaim, 'and you a Serb!'" "And you a Serb!" "And you a German!" "And you an

the more harmless or the more useful is he to his descendants or worshippers. A tutelary spirit, whether ghost or god, is expected to mind his business. He may not be neglectful, he may not be meddlesome or obtrusive. Once in Fiji Hocart tells us he was present with some natives who had met together in a house where the ghosts were to come to fetch away a dead man. One of the ghosts gave news through the medium that in ghostland he had just bought a boat. His living son, uninterested in this posthumous business transaction, bade his father begone. "I am a man, you, a ghost," said he; "I don't like you, I don't want to speak to you, go away."<sup>2</sup>

The preëminent function of social classification appears therefore to be social rule. In institutions

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American!"—it is a very handy whip—in holding a convention, in getting votes, in going to war. The other day the President of the United States gave a fairly adequate account of the usefulness of the classified American: "If a man describes himself to me now in any other terms than those terms [Americanism], *I am not sure of him*; and I love the fellows that come into my office sometimes and say: 'Mr. President, I am an American.' Their hearts are right, their instinct true, they are going in the right direction and *will take the right leadership* if they believe that the leader is also a man who thinks first of America." (The *New York Times*, May 17, 1916.)

<sup>2</sup> Hocart, A. M., in *Folk-Lore*, XXVI. (1915), 132-3.